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Bangladesh beat Afghanistan to stay alive in Asia Cup



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Arsenal subs snatch win against Bilbao in opener



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Gout of this world? Australian teen sprinter set for first real test

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WORLD ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIP

Kipyegon sparkles, Tinch's time away pays off with gold

Canada's Katzberg retains hammer title, Olympic high jump champion Kerr adds world gold

AFP
Tokyo

Faith Kipyegon cemented her status as an athletics legend yesterday by winning her fourth world 1,500m title whilst Cordell Tinch's decision to return to the sport paid off with 110m hurdles gold.

The 31-year-old Kipyegon had bad news for those who entertained hopes of winning the 5,000m later in the week – the Kenyan is going to try and achieve the double as she did in Budapest in 2023. Tinch was also at those championships two years ago but bowed out in the semi-finals, with Grant Holloway going onto win his third world gold.

Yesterday, the roles were reversed as Holloway bowed out in the semis and 25-year-old Tinch took his crown. Not bad for someone who stepped away from the sport and five years ago was selling mobile phones and then worked in a paper factory.

Sadly their golden moments were not shared by a full house, with just 37,000 in the National Stadium and that despite Japan having several athletes in action, including two in the high jump final. Just as on Monday so it was yesterday – New Zealand and Canada won a gold apiece.

Despite deafening patriotic cheers for Yuto Seko and Ryoichi Akamatsu, they had pulled on their tracksuits and were mere spectators long before New Zealand's Olympic high jump champion Hamish Kerr had added world championships gold to his collection.

Canada's Ethan Katzberg retained the men's hammer title, emulating his teammate Camryn Rogers in the women's event on Monday. The mild-mannered Olympic champion, 23, recorded a new championship best, throwing 84.70m in the second round.

Some had thought the women's 1,500m might see a new generation take over in the shape of Kipyegon's 22-year-old teammate Nelly Chepchirchir. However, Kipyegon put that theory firmly in its place, and just as at the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olympics she will be bringing something gold back to her daughter.

"This sport drives me," said Kipyegon, who also set a new world record over the distance in Oregon in July. "I won here in 2021 (at the Olympics) just after becoming a mother, so being back here, winning again, means I can show a new gold medal to my daughter."

Tinch's road back to the track was sparked by a jest made at his expense by his stepfather in 2020, but as being the new world champion sank in he had no regrets about the sabbatical.

"If I hadn't taken that break from the track, I wouldn't be a world champion now," said Tinch. "Everything I learned at that time away from the sport made me the man I am and a world champion."

Kerr is an entertainer and played to the crowd throughout the final, cupping his hands to his ears on the two occasions he went over on the third and final attempt. Once he had sealed victory the Kiwi ran down the infield almost as fast as compatriot Geordie Beamish's finishing winning burst in the 3,000m steeplchase on Monday. "Geordie (Beamish) gave me a kick in my backside after his win last night so I had to win too," said the 29-year-old.

Katzberg said he had felt the pressure after Rogers's victory. "I can't ask for much more," he said. "Camryn (Rogers put the pressure on me to perform tonight. It was an incredible performance from her, so for Canada to win the men's hammer tonight as well is amazing."

As they absorbed their victories Tinch's teenaged teammate, 800m runner Cooper Lutkenhaus, left the scene but with lessons learned. At 16 years 8 months and 28 days old he became the youngest runner to represent the United States at a world championships. But he finished seventh in his heat. "I did not feel any pressure and I really wanted to come out here and give everything," he said. "Being 16 on the world stage is very exciting. My parents and my family still see me as a 16-year-old kid."

Lutkenhaus added he could now go out in Tokyo and have some fun, although reality is also biting. "I still have homework to do on this trip," he admitted.

Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone meanwhile showed she could threaten the women's 400m record set four decades ago by Marita Koch. The American, running this event instead of her speciality, the 400m hurdles, practically strolled over the line in her semi-final in 48.29sec.

Koch's record is 47.60sec. All eyes will be on tomorrow's final.



Kenya's Faith Kipyegon celebrates after winning the women's 1500m final along alongside silver medallist Kenya's Dorcus Ewoi and Bronze medallist Australia's Jessica Hull at the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo. *(Reuters)*



Canada's Ethan Katzberg claimed a third global hammer title in three years when he launched his second attempt a massive 84.70m. *(Reuters)*



New Zealand's Hamish Kerr celebrates after winning the high jump gold. *(AFP)*



American Cordell Tinch (left) capped a fine season by winning the men's 110m hurdles at the world championships yesterday. *(AFP)*

SPOTLIGHT

McLaughlin-Levrone smashes US 400m record



Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone strolled over the line in her 400m semi-final in 48.29 seconds. *(AFP)*

AFP
Tokyo

Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone smashed the long-standing United States women's 400m record to surge into the final at the World Athletics Championships. The 26-year-old American, who is the world record holder at the 400m hurdles but has chosen to run the flat race in Tokyo, blazed through her semi-final in 48.29sec.

That was almost half a second faster than Sanya Richards-Ross's previous US record of 48.70, which had stood since 2006. McLaughlin-Levrone will be the red-hot favourite to capture her first 400m world title in tomorrow's final and said she was "honoured" to better Richards-Ross's national mark.

"Definitely wasn't expecting that time but it just shows the fitness is there," she said. "Excited for the finals and grateful to have taken down a record by an amazing woman."

McLaughlin-Levrone was one of the stars when Tokyo hosted the Covid-delayed Olympic Games in 2021. She set a world record of 51.46sec when winning 400m hurdles gold in one of the stand-out performances of those Games. She was also part of the US 4x400m relay squad that took gold.

She said she still had gas left in the tank after her semi-final performance and was taken aback when she looked at her time on the scoreboard. "I wasn't expecting that but it's not surprising because I know the work's been put in," she said. "It's really just about executing and I'm grateful that it showed me that it's there."

McLaughlin-Levrone was joined in the semi-finals by Paris Olympics champion Marileidy Paulino of the Dominican Republic, who went through in a time of 49.82. Paris Games silver medallist Salwa Eid Naser of Bahrain also qualified along with Poland's Natalia Bukowiecka and Jamaica's Nickisha Pryce.

Britain's Amber Anning, who qualified with a second-quickest time of 49.38, said McLaughlin-Levrone would be the woman to beat in the final. "I think she wanted to put herself into a good position going into that final," said Anning. "I just tried to stay with her as much as possible but still execute my race."

Thiam hits out at Belgian federation but is accused of lying

Tokyo: Nafissatou Thiam has accused the Belgian athletics federation of disrupting her World Championships preparations, but it accused the three-time Olympic champion of lying in a nasty spat days before she begins her quest for a third heptathlon world title.

In an extraordinary exchange yesterday, a tearful Thiam said she had been barred from the team's preparatory camp in Japan due to her refusal to sign the federation's code of conduct, but the federation president said she had written proof the 31-year-old was being untruthful.

"Five days before departure, I received an email from the federation stating that because I hadn't signed the code of conduct, my pre-camp hadn't been validated and therefore no reservation had been made for me," Thiam told a press conference. "I had to find a solution at the last minute. You need a training location, a gym, a place to sleep. Five days before departure in a city like Tokyo, that wasn't easy, and then there's the financial aspect. That had a negative impact. I don't understand it, it's very disappointing."

Thiam is refusing to sign the federation's code of conduct, due to disagreements over image rights as she has conflicting sponsors with those of the Belgium team. She said the decision to bar her from the camp meant she could not prepare in ideal conditions. Thiam's physiotherapist was not accredited either. "I feel punished, and that's unfair. I'm trying to stay positive and professional and forget about it all, but it's definitely having a negative impact."

Belgian federation hit back with president Jessica Mayon accusing Thiam of lying. "It is absolutely untrue that she was not welcome," Mayon said. "I have written proof that what she says isn't true. It's a lie. She received an e-mail promising that someone from the federation was willing to do anything for her at the training camp. Of course, she was welcome there."

SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

Cycling fears spread of race-halting protests

AFP
Paris

Cycling was licking its wounds yesterday and wondering 'where next?' after a chaotic final day of the Vuelta a Espana which saw the concluding stage called off 50 kilometres shy of the capital and the winner crowned in a hotel car park.

The three-week stage race, one of the three Grand Tours at the pinnacle of the sport, was repeatedly disrupted by pro-Palestinian demonstrators fired up by the presence in the race of the Israel Premier Tech team.

A government spokesman told AFP that 100,000 people had taken part in the final-stage protests, which followed other pro-Palestinian protests during the race.

The stage was stopped early. The winner Jonas Vingegaard had to make do with an improvised podium.

For the International Cycling Union (UCI), the sport's governing body, and race organisers, the activists highlighted the vulnerability of races, which stretch across long distance and take place on public roads with free access for spectators.

Some fear for future races, notably the 2026 Tour de France which begins with three stages on Spanish soil, starting in Barcelona.

"Let's hope that the conflict in Gaza is resolved by the time the Tour de France comes around," said Vuelta director Javier Guillen yesterday.

It is not the first race targeted this year.

In May, pro-Palestinian protesters stretched a rope across the road shortly before the finish of the 15th stage of the Giro d'Italia in Naples.

In July, a man wearing a T-shirt reading "Israel out of the Tour" disrupted the finish of the 11th stage of the Tour de France in Toulouse.

But these were isolated incidents, nowhere near the mass demonstrations in Spain, a country where the Palestinian cause is popular.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who has talked of "the genocide in Gaza", even expressed "deep admiration" for the protesters and called for a sporting ban on Israel, a position which incurred the wrath of the UCI yesterday who said it "calls into question Spain's ability to host major international sporting events".

There are fears within the peloton, though, that the Vuelta has set a precedent.


Pro-Palestinians protesters pull barriers and invade the street during the 21st and last stage of the Vuelta a Espana 2025, near Atocha station in Madrid on Sunday. Vuelta final stage has been abandoned because of pro-Palestinian protests. *(AFP)*

"It's clear for everyone that a cycling race can be used as an effective stage for protests and next time it will only get worse, because someone allowed it to happen and looked the other way," wrote experienced Polish rider Michal Kwiatkowski on social media on Sunday evening.

"It's very bad for cycling that the protesters managed to get what they wanted. We cannot pretend that nothing happened."

The Tour de France, the highest profile race in the world, is an obvious target when it next July but the Israel Premier Tech team, 13th in the UCI rankings, is automatically invited to all the most prestigious races on the calendar.

It dropped the word 'Israel' from its shirts during the Vuelta for several stages but categorically refused to throw in the towel.

Several riders on other squads called for the withdrawal of the team which was created by Israeli-Canadian billionaire Sylvan Adams, who likes to describe himself as an ambassador for Israel.

The race director also suggested that such a withdrawal would help calm the situation while adding that was a decision for the UCI.

"We alerted the UCI to the situation. They took a position through a statement to keep Israel PT in the race," Guillen said yesterday.

In its statement the UCI expressed its "total disapproval of and deep concern" about the events that marked this year's Vuelta, calling them a "serious violation of the Olympic Charter and the fundamental principles of sport".

The war in Gaza was sparked by Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, which resulted in the deaths of 1,219 people, most of them civilians, according to an AFP tally of official figures.

Israel's retaliatory campaign in Gaza has killed at least 64,905 people, also mostly civilians, according to figures from the health ministry that the United Nations considers reliable.

CRICKET

Bangladesh hold their nerve to edge Afghanistan

Young Tanzid Hasan impresses with a polished 52 for Bangladesh

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Spinner Nasum Ahmed produced a miserly spell to help Bangladesh beat Afghanistan by eight runs yesterday and keep their Asia Cup hopes alive.

Bangladesh posted 154-5 batting first as opener Tanzid Hasan starred with his 52 off 31 balls in Abu Dhabi.

Nasum and fellow spinner Rishad Hossain then took two wickets each before pace bowler Mustafizur Rahman returned figures of 3-28 to help bowl out Afghanistan for 146.

Taskin Ahmed also claimed two wickets as he wrapped up the innings with the final ball of the match.

Bangladesh ended Group B with two wins and one defeat in their three outings.

Their chances of reaching the Super Four stage will depend on the final match of the group between Afghanistan and Sri Lanka tomorrow.

NET RUN-RATE

Bangladesh will go through if Sri Lanka win, but an Afghan victory would see them progress and leave the Sri Lankans and Bangladesh to be split on net run-rate.

Left-arm spinner Nasum rocked the Afghanistan chase early when he struck with the first ball of the innings to trap Sediqullah Atal lbw and then grabbed the key wicket of Ibrahim Zadran, for five, in the fifth over.

He returned figures of 2-11 from his four overs.

Rishad dismissed Gulbadin Naib caught and bowled for 16 with his leg-spin and then sent back the dangerous Rahmanullah Gurbaz for 35 to dent Afghanistan.

Azmatullah Omarzai attempted to revive the chase with three sixes in his 16-ball 30 but holed out off Taskin.

Skipper Rashid Khan made one final push with a quickfire 20 but fell to Mustafizur, who struck again to be on a hat-trick which was avoided by Fazalhaq Farooqi.


Bangladesh's Saif Hassan (left) and Tanzid Hasan bump their fists during the Asia Cup 2025 Twenty20 international against Afghanistan a the Sheikh Zayed Cricket Stadium in Abu Dhabi yesterday. *(AFP)*

Earlier Tanzid put on an opening stand of 63 with Saif Hasan, who made 30, as the two racked up 59 in the powerplay.

Rashid broke the stand as he struck in his first over by bowling Saif and Afghanistan's spinners soon took control. Left-arm wrist spinner Noor Ahmad trapped skipper Litton Das lbw for nine to further peg back Bangladesh.

Tanzid raised his fifty off 28 deliveries but fell to Noor in the next over. Towhid Hridoy added a 20-ball 26 but although Bangladesh managed just 67 runs in the final 10 overs, it proved enough for the win.

BRIEF SCORES

Bangladesh 154 for 5 (Tanzid 52, Saif 30, Noor 2-23, Rashid 2-26) **beat Afghanistan 146** (Gurbaz 35, Mustafizur 3-28, Nasum 2-11, Rishad 2-18) **by eight runs**

FOCUS

Qatar men's team beat Saudi Arabia in Arabian Gulf Padel Championship


Qatar players in action against Saudi Arabia on the second day of the Arabian Gulf Padel Championship.

QNA
DOHA

Qatari men's team defeated Saudi Arabia 2-1 in the second round of the Arabian Gulf Padel Championship, which Qatar is currently hosting on the Padel Inn courts until September 19.

The tournament, which kicked off yesterday and is organized by the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Padel and Badminton Federation, will see the participation of various Gulf teams: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. The tournament will be held in a league format, with each team playing three matches against the opposing team.

The Qatari men's national team succeeded in achieving victory in two of the three matches it played against its Saudi counterpart, as the duo consisting of Rashid Nawaf and Hassan Wali won the first match in two sets to none, with a score of 6-2, 6-2.

In the second match, the duo consisting of Mohammed Saadoun and Meshari Nawaf won in two sets to none, with a score of 6-0, 6-0.

Meanwhile, the duo consisting of Ali al-Saadi and Khaled Saadoun lost the third match in two sets to one, with a score of 5-7, 6-2, 0-6. This is the second consecutive victory for the Qatari team, having defeated Oman 3-0 in the first round.

The Qatari national team is scheduled to meet its Kuwaiti counterpart today, in the third round of the tournament.

For his part, Rashid Nawaf, a player on the Qatari padel team, expressed his happiness with the team's victory over Saudi Arabia.

Nawaf said in a statement following the match: "We performed well against the Saudi team, and our performance reflected the team's readiness to achieve the best possible results during the tournament."

He added: "Our goal is to continue our strong performance in the upcoming matches and our ambition is to represent Qatar in the best possible way in this Gulf Championship."

Nawaf called on Qatari fans to attend the Padel Inn courts to support the team, saying: "Fan support makes a difference, and we hope to see fans in large numbers at upcoming matches to push us toward continued victories and our quest to compete for the title."

PAKISTAN CANCEL PRESS CONFERENCE AMID INDIA HANDSHAKE ROW

Dubai: Pakistan cancelled a pre-match press conference at the Asia Cup yesterday as the fallout rumbles on from a handshake row with arch-rivals India.

The Pakistan team did however turn up for practice on the eve of today's group game against hosts the United Arab Emirates.

"Pakistan has decided not to hold their pre-match press conference today," a short message from the Asian Cricket Council said.

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is awaiting a response from the world governing body International Cricket Council over a protest about match referee Andy Pycroft.

The Zimbabwean oversaw Sunday's politically charged clash with India, after which the victorious India team refused to shake hands with the Pakistan players.

The PCB alleged that Pycroft told Pakistan skipper Salman Agha not to shake hands with Indian counterpart Suryakumar Yadav before the match.

Pycroft is scheduled to be the match referee for the game today.

If Pakistan beat the home side in Dubai they will face neighbours India again on Sunday in the next round.

Last Sunday's seven-wicket defeat to India was the first time the rivals had faced off in cricket since the countries fought a brief but deadly border conflict in May.

INDIAN CRICKET SEALS BUMPER NEW SPONSOR FOLLOWING BAN

New Delhi: Indian cricket yesterday announced Apollo Tyres as its multimillion-dollar main sponsor after fantasy sports gaming platform Dream11 pulled out following a ban on online gambling.

The men's team travelled to the United Arab Emirates for the ongoing Asia Cup without a sponsor on their shirt after Dream11 ended a deal worth $43.6mn.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) did not reveal the value of the new contract, but said it is higher than the previous amount.

"The new partnership, secured after a rigorous bidding process, represents a substantial increase in sponsorship value, signifying the immense and growing commercial appeal of Indian cricket," the BCCI said in a statement.

Apollo Tyres will pay Rs4.5 crore per match to the BCCI, surpassing Dream11's earlier contribution of Rs4 crore per match.

The deal is until March 2028 with the Apollo Tyres logo printed on the jerseys of the Indian men's and women's players.

The Indian parliament in August passed a sweeping law banning online gambling.

Fantasy sports apps such as Dream11 still operate, although for prizes and not cash.

The government said the rapid spread of gambling platforms had caused widespread financial distress, addiction and even suicide.

It also said it was linked to fraud, money laundering and terrorism financing.

ATHLETICS

Australian teen sprinter Gout set for first real test

'I used to do great things when I was young. But the transition to senior from junior is always tougher'

AFP
Tokyo

Gout Gout's name has sparked debate but the real question for the athletics world is whether the exciting Australian teenage sprinter can fill the vacuum left by Usain Bolt.

The precocious 17-year-old – born to South Sudanese parents who fled the war-torn country via Egypt and arrived in Australia in 2006 – makes his world championships debut in the 200 metre heats in Tokyo today.

Three-time defending champion Noah Lyles and Olympic gold medallist Letsile Tebogo may claim they have the right to be considered Bolt's heirs.

However, for many the tall and rangy Gout is the one who has the raw potential to become the undisputed superstar of sprinting to succeed Bolt.

The Jamaican eight-time Olympic gold medallist and still the 100m and 200m world record holder retired in 2017.

Gout ran 20.04sec at last year's Australian All Schools Athletics Championship, only the second athlete to record a time faster than Bolt's Under-18 best of 20.13sec.

In doing so he also broke the 56-year-old Australian national senior record set by the late Peter Norman when he took bronze in the 1968 200m Olympic final.

In June, Gout lowered it further by clocking 20.02sec at the Golden Spike meeting in Ostrava.

Bolt has taken a liking to Gout, posting a photograph of them together with the caption: "He looks like young me."

However, the 39-year-old Jamaican has also warned that huge potential does not always translate into success. "It's always easier when you're younger," Bolt told reporters in Tokyo.

"I used to do great things when I was young. But the transition to senior from junior is always tougher. It's all about if you get the right coach, the right people around you, if you're focused enough.

"So there will be a lot of factors that will determine if he's going to be great and continue on the same trajectory."

Gout, whose family keeps him grounded despite the glare of publicity – he still shares a room with his "messier" older brother Mawjen – admits comparisons with Bolt are daunting.

"In the moment it feels great because everyone wants to be compared to Usain, but at times it does get a bit overwhelming," Gout says on his Australian Athletics profile page.

"Although I do run like Usain Bolt, I do maybe look like him in a couple of ways, I'm just trying to be myself."

'I CALL HIM GUOT'

Gout, who will return to school after the championships and wants to study psychology at university, will receive all the help he needs to remain himself from his father Bona, mother Monica and six siblings. Both parents have tried to provide as much as they can for their children. Former law student Bona is a food technician and earns extra income by driving an Uber, and Monica is a cleaner. It is Bona who has led the battle to restore the family's name to Guot.

James Templeton, the sprinter's manager, insists otherwise.

"Gout Gout is how it's going to be," Templeton told SEN radio station.

"You know the thing you hope to avoid in your ankle? That's how it's pronounced."

Bona is adamant that Sudanese officials made a spelling error in Arabic on the paperwork when the family left for Egypt and is furious to be associated with the arthritic disease.

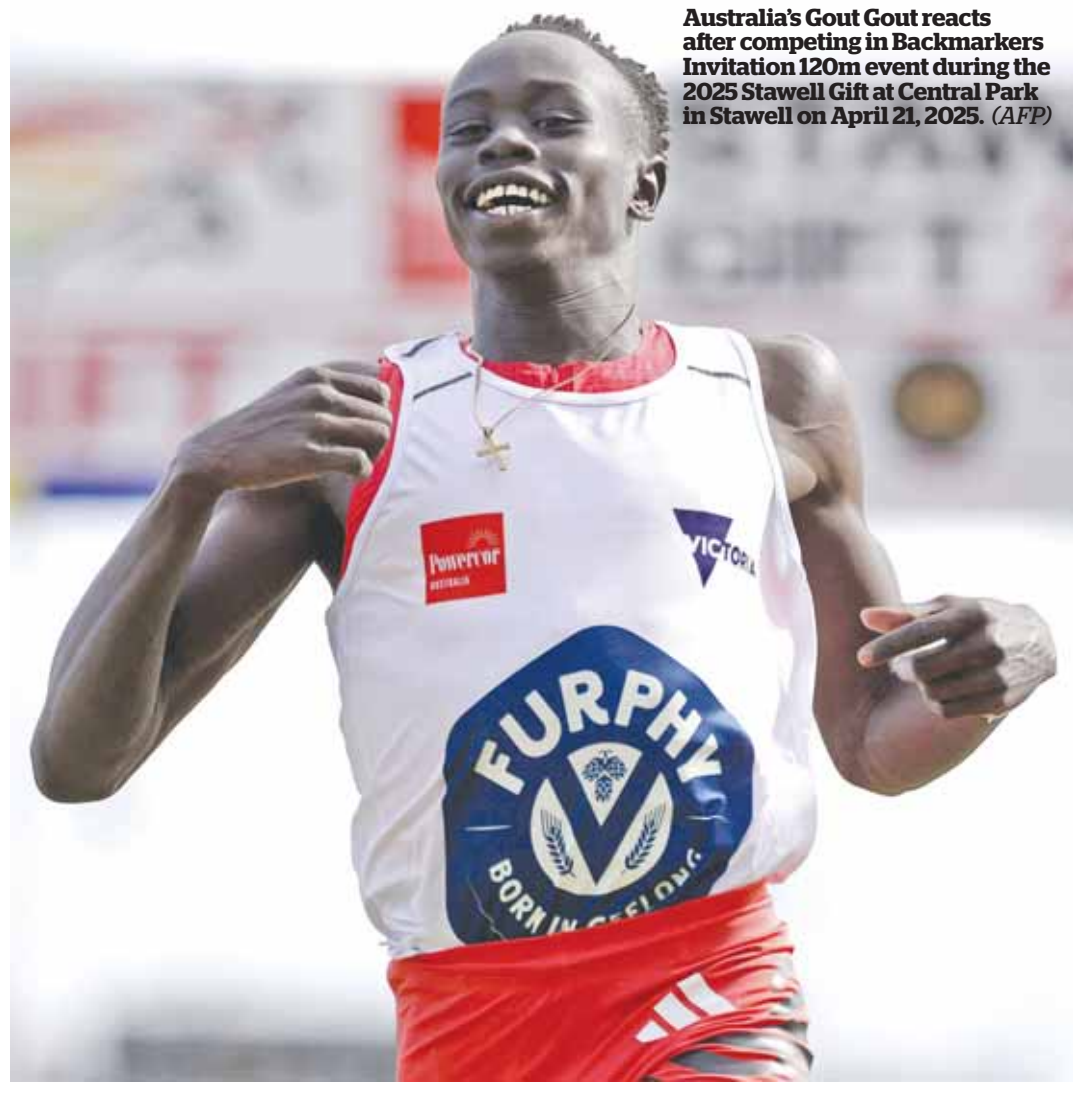
"His name is Guot, it's supposed to be Guot," Bona told Australia's 7NEWS last December.

"I know that Gout Gout is a disease name but I don't want my son to be called a disease name... it's something that's not acceptable.

"It's culturally very important and in particular if (family) see Guot Guot running they connect to the name. "But when they hear Gout Gout they've lost the meaning of it. His mum is calling him Guot and the same here, I call him Guot."

Whatever the outcome, the youngster's growing fanbase is already quipping that he is "Gout of this world".

Tokyo could be the beginning of a road which climaxes with gold at his home Olympics in Brisbane in 2032.



Australia's Gout Gout reacts after competing in Backmarkers Invitation 120m event during the 2025 Stawell Gift at Central Park in Stawell on April 21, 2025. *(AFP)*

FOCUS

'Like failing a math test': US teen Lutkenhaus schooled at worlds

AFP
Tokyo

American 16-year-old Cooper Lutkenhaus vowed to come back stronger after being eliminated in the 800 metre heats at the World Athletics Championships yesterday, comparing it to "failing a math test".

The Texas high-school student became the youngest runner to represent the United States at a world championships but made an early exit after finishing seventh in his heat in Tokyo.

Lutkenhaus looked in position to attack with about 150m to go but was unable to break through and crossed the line in 1min 47.68sec. He took the positives from his performance in front of over 50,000 fans, saying he "came out here just to learn as much as I could and race the best guys in the world".

"It's not your day every time, anybody can tell you that," said Lutkenhaus, who does not turn 17 until December 19. "Being in school it's like failing a math test occasionally, but you come back and I'm just excited for what the future holds."



USA's Cooper Lutkenhaus reacts after competing in the 800m heats during the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo. *(AFP)*

Lutkenhaus punched his ticket to Tokyo with a brilliant effort to finish second at the US trials in Oregon, where he set an under-18 world record time of 1:42.27. That was the fifth-fastest time over two laps for a US runner. He could not repeat those heroics in the Japanese capital but said he was "leaving the stadium with my head held high".

"Obviously that's the biggest crowd I've ever raced in front of," he said. "It was just really cool just to get to step out on that track and see everybody. I got to see my family up in the stands, which is something you won't really forget ever."

Lutkenhaus said he felt no pressure competing in Tokyo but his presence on the US team has made headlines. British runner Ben Pattison, who qualified second from Lutkenhaus's heat, said he was forced to do a double take when he saw his young rival's date of birth on the start list.

"It makes me feel old, and me saying I feel old is going to make a lot of other people feel old," said the 23-year-old Pattison. Kenya's Olympic champ Emmanuel Wanyonyi was among the qualifiers for the semi-finals.

FIFA announces $355mn World Cup club benefit scheme

Lausanne: FIFA announced on Tuesday a $355mn (300mn euros) pay-out to clubs releasing players for next year's World Cup - a 70 percent hike on the 2022 edition.

The new benefit scheme deal, reached in association with the powerful European Club Association (ECA), includes for the first time players involved in qualifiers but not figuring in the 48-team 2026 tournament, co-hosted by the USA, Canada and Mexico.

For the 32-team 2022 World Cup in Qatar, FIFA distributed $209mn to 440 sides "from 51 FIFA member associations", football's world governing body noted.

"The enhanced edition of the FIFA Club Benefits Programme for the FIFA World Cup 2026 is going a step further by recognising financially the huge contribution that so many clubs and their players around the world make to the staging of both the qualifiers and the final tournament," said FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

"Clubs play a pivotal role in the success of national team football and this initiative recognises every element of it, from early development through to release for the most important games," said ECA boss and Paris Saint-Germain president Nasser al-Khelaifi.

TENNIS

Paolini survives as Italy enter semis

AFP
Shenzhen

Two heroic three-hour comebacks from Jasmine Paolini and Elisabetta Cocciaretto saw Italy survive a scare against hosts China in a gruelling quarter-final at the Billie Jean King Cup in Shenzhen yesterday.

An escape act from Cocciaretto gave the defending champions the opening point of the tie, the Italian digging deep to post a 4-6, 7-5, 7-5 win over Yue Yuan.

Paolini sealed the victory by defeating Wang Xinyu, who squandered a one-set lead and early breaks in the second and third sets to fall 4-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 to the world number eight.

"It was a really tough one. Xinyu was playing really good tennis," said Paolini, who secured Italy's place in the semi-finals for a third straight year.

"Today was a bit tough for me, but I tried to stay there for everyone that was on the bench, the Italian fans, for the country."

Earlier at the Shenzhen Bay Sports Centre Arena, in a two-hour 52-minute battle, Cocciaretto wiped a 2-5 deficit in the second set, and a 0-4 deficit in the decider before securing the victory.

Yue was cruising at 6-4, 5-2 before her Italian opponent launched a comeback, taking the next five games to level the match.

"For sure it was a tough moment. She was playing unbelievable and I wasn't too aggressive," said Cocciaretto of her mindset at 2-5.

"Something changed in my mind and I said, 'Go for it, be aggressive, and no matter what, don't think about the score, just try your best and fight'. And that's what I did."



Italy's Jasmine Paolini reacts during her match against China's Xinyu Wang in the Billie Jean King Cup quarter-finals in Shenzhen. *(Reuters)*

Yue responded by winning the first 14 consecutive points of the third set en route to a 4-0 advantage. But once again, Cocciaretto fought back, clawing her way to 5-5 and claiming a decisive break in the 11th game to deliver a blow to the home fans.

"It was the first match of the Billie Jean King Cup, facing the home team. I knew that there was tension between us," said the 92nd-ranked Cocciaretto.

Tennis legend Billie Jean King attended the match and Cocciaretto admitted she was nervous at the start when she spotted her in the stands. "I said to myself, 'Don't think and don't watch her, please, because if not, you don't think about the game'.

"But I'm really honoured to play this match and see her in the crowd," added the 24-year-old.

In the semi-finals, Italy will face the winner of Wednesday's clash between Spain and Ukraine.

Drug cheats put India Olympic bid and careers at risk

Indian sport is battling to shake off its reputation for being one of the world's worst doping offenders as the country pushes an ambitious bid to host the 2036 Olympics. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has raised concerns about the number of Indian competitors taking performance-enhancing drugs and so too has the country's best-known athlete. The 2021 Olympic javelin champion Neeraj Chopra made a blunt admission earlier this year. "Doping is a big problem in India among our athletes," he told local media, saying they instead should "eat well, rest well and work hard".

The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) last month formed a new anti-doping panel after the IOC flagged India's poor record. The government has passed a new national anti-doping bill aiming to tighten enforcement, expand testing facilities and "ensure the highest standards of integrity" in sports. "Obviously the IOC would want to make sure that in awarding the Games to a country, the host has a robust doping policy and governance," Michael Payne, former IOC marketing director, told AFP. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) lists India among the worst offenders among nations submitting more than 1,000 samples. India's national anti-doping agency, NADA, insists the figures reflect more aggressive testing in the nation of 1.4bn people. From 5,606 samples collected in 2023, 213 came back positive. The synthetic steroid stanozolol is the most widely used banned substance taken by Indian athletes, experts say. Despite its vast population India has won only 10 Olympic golds in its history. Experts say desperation to add to that and escape poverty is one reason why some Indian athletes are prepared to risk doping. Success in sports can be a ticket to coveted government jobs, often with the police or armed forces. That provides life-long financial security after their sporting careers end. "Athletes know that they can be punished but still put their careers at stake," lawyer Saurabh Mishra, who has defended athletes in doping scandals, said. "(They know that) getting a medal will help them clinch a government job."

Athletics leads India's doping violations, followed by wrestling, where 19 athletes were recently banned. In July under-23 wrestling champion and Paris Olympics quarter-finalist Reetika Hooda tested positive and was provisionally suspended. Mishra said some athletes are victims of ignorance, consuming banned substances through supplements or medicines, but others take risks knowingly. Sometimes they are encouraged by their coaches to dope. Sports medicine expert Saranjeet Singh, who has written extensively on doping in India, said a recent surge in violations was only partly due to stricter testing. "They cannot achieve the level of performance that they want at international level and use banned drugs for a short cut," Singh told AFP. India now faces a race to prove its credibility, as it competes with the likes of Indonesia, Turkiye, Chile and Qatar for the 2036 Games. The former IOC marketing director Payne noted that many past Olympic hosts had chequered doping histories. While doping is an issue, India's greater obstacle to staging an Olympics lies elsewhere, he said. "The bigger issue is confidence in the overall operational delivery capabilities of the host, and there India has a lot of work to do," Payne said. He was referring to the corruption-riddled 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, memories of which still linger. "That is the biggest hurdle facing India's bid," Payne said.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Hilal come back from goal down to beat Duhail

Agencies
Riyadh

Saudi's Al Hilal produced a second half fightback to defeat Qatar's Al Duhail 2-1 in their AFC Champions League Elite opener at the Kingdom Arena in Riyadh yesterday.

Darwin Nunez came off the bench in the second half to cancel out Adil Boulbina's opener before Thoe Hernandez volleyed home the winner to secure the win for Simone Inzaghi's side. The home side were almost caught out as early as the fourth minute by an Al Duhail counter-attack when Krzysztof Piatek broke free on the right before setting up Luis Alberto, whose shot from inside the box was calmly dealt with by Joao Cancelo.

Al Hilal's Malcolm tried his luck from distance in the eighth minute but sent his shot over the bar, while Nasser al-Dawsari sent a curling effort wide off the right post five minutes later. Al Duhail had another scare in the 26th minute when Malcom pounced on a loose ball and combined with Marcos Leonardo, only for his effort to be denied by keeper Salah Zakaria before Hassan al-Tambakti placed his header wide off the ensuing corner.

Hilal continued to pile on the pressure with Leonardo and al-Dawsari threatening before Sergej Milinkovic-Savic unleashed a powerful drive from distance which was tipped away by Zakaria. But their high press left them vulnerable and a long ball from Al Duhail's Youssouf Sabaly sent Adil Boulbina through, with the Algerian midfielder rounding Yassine Bounou before finishing with a sublime strike.

Al Hilal thought they had equalised in the fifth minute of first half stoppage time through Yusuf Akcicek's long range effort but their celebrations were cut short after a VAR review ruled out the goal. Inzaghi sent on Nunez for al-Tambakti in the second half and the move paid off in the 57th minute, with the Uruguayan finishing off a Hamad al-Yami's cutback following a fine team move. With momentum on their side, Al Hilal capitalised on a poor clearance from Ibrahima Bamba 10 minutes later - leaving Hernandez to hit a volleyed attempt which hit Bamba before sailing past Zakaria as Al Hilal took the points.


Al Hilal's Darwin Nunez celebrates after scoring against Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League Elite match in Riyadh yesterday.

AHLI TO HOST BAHRAIN'S AL KHALDIYA TODAY

Qatar's Al Ahli are aiming for a strong debut in the AFC Champions League Two (ACL Two) as they host Bahrain's Al Khaldiya SC at Al Thumama Stadium today. Igor Biscan's men booked their berth in Asia's second-tier club competition courtesy of their fourth-place finish in the Qatar Stars League (QSL) last season.

They have been drawn into Group B, which also includes Uzbekistan's FC Andijon and Turkmenistan's FK Arkadag. Al Ahli coach Biscan said his team is confident of a good start to the competition. "We are excited to begin the new challenge," Biscan said yesterday. "Our target is to start the competition with a victory against Al Khaldiya SC."

After an impressive QSL campaign last season, Al Ahli got off to a poor start in the new term, losing three straight matches. But they regained confidence on Saturday, beating Al Wakrah 5-3 for their first win in the Qatari top flight. Al Ahli will bank on several talented players, including Sekou Yansane, Julian Draxler, Erik Exposito and Driss Fettouhi.

The match will kick off at 7pm.

SPOTLIGHT

Substitutes lead Arsenal to victory in Bilbao

Martinelli and Trossard score in the second half as Gunners make winning start

Reuters
Bilbao, Spain

Arsenal began their Champions League campaign with a 2-0 win away to Athletic Bilbao, with Gabriel Martinelli making an immediate impact from the bench to open the scoring and another substitute, Leandro Trossard, netting the second.

Mikel Arteta's side, beaten at the semi-final stage last season by eventual winners Paris St Germain, were the better team on the night, but laboured to put away Athletic who were backed by a boisterous San Mames stadium, until the substitutes arrived. Martinelli replaced Eberechi Eze in the 71st minute, with Arsenal struggling to find a breakthrough despite creating plenty of chances, and the substitute netted an impressive solo goal after less than a minute on the pitch.

The Brazilian forward was sent racing through on goal after a flicked pass from Trossard, and the two combined again three minutes from time, with Martinelli's pullback from the byline finished off by Trossard. The game took a while to get going before Arsenal ventured forward and began to create chances. Athletic defender Andoni Gorosabel made a crucial clearance with Eze about to pull the trigger from close range after a Noni Madueke pass.

Viktor Gyokeres had a couple of opportunities – a strike which never troubled Athletic keeper Unai Simon and a diving header which went wide, with Arsenal looking to the Swedish striker's movement and strength to break through Athletic's backline. Arsenal began to turn the screw and increase the pressure in the early stages of the second half, while Athletic always posed a threat on the counter but the game was failing to match the frenzied atmosphere in the stands.

Mikel Arteta sent Trossard on for Gyokeres, but it wasn't until the introduction of Martinelli that Arsenal really got going. Trossard's ball from inside his own half sent Martinelli through and, after controlling it neatly, he drove forward into the area and kept his nerve to send a low shot past Simon.


Arsenal's Gabriel Martinelli scores against Athletic Club Bilbao at the San Mames stadium in Bilbao, Spain. *(AFP)*

Martinelli then turned provider, going past his marker before finding Trossard, who had time to take a touch before getting a shot away, which took a deflection on its way past the keeper.

Arsenal began last season's campaign with a 0-0 draw at Atalanta, and they almost had to settle for a similar result, but Arteta turned to his bench to defeat an Athletic side making their first Champions League appearance since 2014. Arsenal host Olympiakos in their next Champions League game on October 1 with Athletic away to Borussia Dortmund on the same day.

BELGIAN DEBUTANTS UNION SECURE SHOCK OPENING WIN AT PSV

Belgium's Union Saint-Gilloise made a dream debut in the Champions League group phase by stunning hosts PSV Eindhoven 3-1 in a feisty derby against their Dutch counterparts in Eindhoven. Union, who won the Belgian title for the first time in 90 years last season, earned their first points as Promise David converted an early penalty and Anouar Ait El Hadj ran half the length of the pitch to add a second before the interval.

Defender Kevin Mac Allister bundled home the third 10 minutes from time, forcing the ball over the line with his knees from a corner, to complete a shock result. PSV grabbed a last-minute consolation through new signing Ruben van Bommel but it failed to put any gloss on a miserable night for the Dutch champions.

Union profited from an off-form showing in front of goal from PSV, who came into the match having scored 19 goals in six domestic fixtures this season.

Union competed in the Champions League for the first time last season but were knocked out in the third preliminary round. They next host Newcastle United on October 1 when PSV visit Bayer Leverkusen.

Isak set for Liverpool debut against Atletico Madrid

Liverpool: Liverpool manager Arne Slot has revealed Alexander Isak could make his highly anticipated debut in today's Champions League clash against Atletico Madrid.

Isak joined the Premier League champions in a British-record £125mn ($169mn) move from Newcastle on transfer deadline day. The 25-year-old did not feature in Sunday's 1-0 win at Burnley – Liverpool's first match since his blockbuster transfer – because he is still short of full fitness after missing much of the pre-season.

Isak had trained alone in a bid to force through his switch, leaving him in need of extra work to get up to speed. "Definitely a chance because he's in the squad, so then there's a chance to play. I would usually say 99.9 percent sure, but I can say 100 percent sure he will not play 90 minutes," Slot told reporters.

Asked if there was a chance of Isak starting at Anfield, Slot said: "The only thing we're sure of is he will not play 90. He's part of the squad, so it's already a Champions League game to look forward to, but if people look forward to his playing time, that could mean that could happen tomorrow as well."

Isak's goals helped Newcastle end their 56-year trophy drought when they defeated Liverpool in the League Cup final last season, while the Magpies also qualified for the Champions League thanks in large part to the Swede's prolific form.

But his only appearance this season came for Sweden in an 18-minute substitute cameo in a 2-0 defeat against Kosovo on September 8. Slot said getting fit was the striker's biggest challenge. "He doesn't have to prove to anyone that he's good enough to play in the Premier League, because that's what he's proven already at Newcastle," said the Dutchman. "So the main challenge he has is to become so fit that he's first of all ready to do what he did last season."

The spotlight will be firmly fixed on Isak, which could be a blessing for Liverpool playmaker Florian Wirtz, who has struggled to make an impact.

PREVIEW

PSG more confident than last season despite injuries, says Enrique


Paris Saint-Germain's head coach Luis Enrique reacts during a conference at the Campus Paris Saint-Germain in Poissy, in the western outskirts of Paris. *(AFP)*

Reuters
Paris

Paris St Germain are more confident than last season as they begin their Champions League title defence at home to Atalanta, manager Luis Enrique said, despite key forwards Ousmane Dembele and Desire Doue being sidelined.

Dembele faces six weeks out with a hamstring injury and Doue around four weeks due to a calf problem sustained playing for France.

The 2024-25 treble winners have started the domestic campaign strongly are unbeaten in Ligue 1. They beat Lens 2-0 on Sunday thanks to a double from 23-year-old France forward Bradley Barcola.

Defender Lucas Beraldo will also miss the Atalanta game today due to an ankle problem. "We have more confidence than last year at this moment of the Champions League," Spaniard Luis Enrique told reporters.

Three defeats and a draw in last season's eight-game league phase left the Parisians outside the top eight, and they reached the knockout rounds only through the playoffs. "Last year, it was a complicated moment because of the lack of efficiency (due to the number of games).

"But it is the normal process of a team that wanted to improve... For me, it's harder to win the first than the second or third." Luis Enrique said. "The first title is always difficult because the players don't think they're capable of winning it. But we showed the way. Now, the whole of PSG and the young players want to win it they know they're capable."

PSG, who stormed to their first Champions League title with a 5-0 victory over Inter Milan in the final, also reached the Club World Cup final in July where they were beaten 3-0 by Chelsea. "It is in my mentality to seek improvement, to show the players that there is no calm, or complacency about the future, we must constantly think about getting better," the coach said. "Our objective is to make history again and to win a second consecutive Champions League and we have to be ambitious."

Atalanta head into Europe under new coach Ivan Juric, who will be managing a Champions League game for the first time. "They changed their coach so it is tough for us to predict how they will play, but just like in previous seasons, we're talking about a tough team with quality players," Luis Enrique said.

"Gian Piero Gasperini (previous manager) has left his mark on the team, it will be a very demanding match for us."

Gasperini guided Atalanta to their first Europa League title in 2024 and to third place in Serie A last season.